№ 166

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Issue № 166: Oysters Rockefeller: A Treatise on Existential Angst and Gastronomic Despair

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

Return Policy:
If this magazine does not meet your expectations,
please return it to us in its original condition
for a full refund, minus the cost of enlightenment.

Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded) To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

H2H

Bat-Boy's Salad Loaf Trousers Stolen by Time-Traveling Lobster Mob!

By Firdaus Olivia Kaczka

Sweet, sweet child of mine, you are not the bearer of that fraudulent name that was tacked upon your back in late infancy and which followed you into grade school and high school and cosmetology school. That charade, that flimsy veneer of identity, is but a whisper in the howling wind of true, unadulterated being. No, Sotiroula Marlowe Velitchkova, that appellation, like a dyspeptic sphinx gargling ouzo, bears the weight of epochs, a veritable palimpsest of existential ennui, born, as it were, under the celestial orchestration of a Grecian June, which, as any connoisseur of meteorological malfeasance will attest, is a time of particular atmospheric discombobulation. Seventy-three years, a veritable palimpsest, inscribed with the ephemera of existence, a mosaic of Athenian sunbeams and the faint, phosphorescent effluence of memory, a memory, I might add, that appears to have been marinated in a particularly potent vinaigrette of the bizarre.

Her left hand, a conjurer of shadows, eschewed the tangible, the mere baubles of sentiment, preferring instead the spectral resonance of 1980s parachute pants, those shimmering vestments, a sartorial absurdity spun from the gossamer threads of Hellmann's Super Supper Salad Loaf, a culinary chimera of that bygone era, a phantom of shimmering shrouds, a testament to the fleeting nature of both haute couture and haute cuisine, which, let us face it, are often indistinguishable.

The diurnal lamentations, the day wept glass tears, etching cryptic runes upon the cracked glass of her apartment, a stage for forgotten dramas where the applause had long since receded into the abyss of silence, a theater where applause had turned to silence, a silence, I might add, that was about as subtle as a rhinoceros tap-dancing on a tin roof. Sotiroula, a woman of layered years, traversed the dim-lit stage of her life, glided through the dim stage, her hands encountering the detritus of yesterday, brushing against yesterday's ghosts: a porcelain doll, its painted eyes a mute oracle of lost childhood, a

childhood, I suspect, that involved a surfeit of pickled herring; a book, its pages yellowed, the ink bleeding into oblivion, each word a mere exhalation, a literary flatulence, if you will; a rusted key, its teeth biting into the phantom flesh of vanished doors, biting phantom doors, doors that, in all probability, led to a dimension where salad loaf was the currency.

In the corner, where a vacuum cleaner might be, there is instead a most peculiar sight. A grizzled seaman, sporting a salt-crusted beard and a gleam in his eye, zips around on a battered skateboard, a veritable Poseidon on a plank. He's not cleaning; he's "lobsterin'," a pursuit that, upon closer inspection, appears to be a thinly veiled excuse for rampant chaos. He wields a large, tattered dragnet, which he casts with surprising agility, like a deranged spider weaving a web of nautical nonsense. "Ahoy, me hearties!" he shouts, "Time to haul in the catch!" He swoops past Sotiroula's furniture, attempting to ensnare unsuspecting passersby whom he refers to as "lobsters," a taxonomic error of epic proportions. "Got a nice-sized bug there!" he exclaims as he nabs a bewildered houseplant. "This one's goin' straight to the pot!" He speaks in a rapid-fire patois of lobsterman's lingo, peppered with nautical terms and excited pronouncements about "keepers" and "shorts," a linguistic stew that would make James Joyce blush.

Meanwhile, in the heart of Echo Park, a spectacle unfolds: a piranha, scalded in acid (yet somehow still alive and furiously energetic, a testament to the resilience of the aquatic underclass), stands atop a precarious podium of overturned trash cans. Its fins twitch with manic precision as it conducts an orchestra composed of a wrecking crew. These burly figures, wielding sledgehammers, jackhammers, and crowbars instead of violins and cellos, are poised to unleash sonic mayhem, a symphony of destruction that would make Attila the Hun weep with joy. The rain traced skeletal poems on the window, their lines both lucid and opaque, lines both clear and opaque, a visual paradox that would confound even the most seasoned metaphysician. A single phrase emerged, whispered by the storm: “Memory is dust, and salad loaf pants, a dream,” a pronouncement that, frankly, sounds like a fortune cookie written by Salvador Dalí. Sotiroula’s mind, a flickering cinema, a flickering film, reeled: “Those pants, a talisman of youth, a talisman, now lost in this swirling residue? If each mote is a fragment of time, is time, what remains when the salad loaf pants are gone?” Time, that trickster, a trickster, blurred the edges

of past and present. The seaman's chaotic "lobsterin'" becomes a bizarre counterpoint to her quest. The pants' absence was not emptiness but a conjuring, a spectral presence woven into the fabric of her identity, a sartorial ghost story for the ages.

Shards of salad loaf memory, spinning in the rain's eddy, pants, vanished, their echo trembling in the vacuum's unquiet song, inhaling centuries into its mechanical hymn, inhaling centuries, a temporal vacuum cleaner of the soul. The window fractures light, into particulate verses, into verses of motes, each mote, a syllable of nostalgia, a whispered remnant of laughter and regret, whispers of laughter and regret, a melancholy madrigal for the lost salad loaf pants. I catalog the broken objects: a rusted hinge, a glint of forgotten silver, a glint of silver, the seaman's discarded fishing hooks, and a flurry of tiny tap shoes, a suspended breath of time, a suspended breath, each a stanza in the grand ode of absence. Here, memory is dust, or rather, it is the stage for a troupe of tap-dancing scorpions, former Disney child stars, working the circuit of forgotten apartments. They click and clack their tiny shoes, performing a routine of melancholic nostalgia. The scorpions are replacing the dust mites. Here, memory is the stage for their act, and salad loaf, a weightless, transient reservoir, a weightless reservoir, of all we have been and lost; the pants' vacant shimmer, reminds us that every fragment is a universe, a universe in every fragment, ever expanding, ever collapsing, in the quiet quantum of our souls, a quantum physics of the pantry.

The piranha, with a flick of its tail, signals the start. The wrecking crew, with gleeful abandon, begins to smash their instruments through a bewildered crowd of Echo Park hipsters. The resulting cacophony somehow coalesces into a recognizable melody: the dirge from Mozart's Requiem, a morbidly magnificent soundtrack for the apocalypse of salad loaf. The beautiful, mournful music is juxtaposed against the destructive chaos, creating a surreal and unsettling effect, a visual and auditory cocktail of the absurd. Feathers fly, coffee spills, and the air is thick with the dust of shattered dreams and musical instruments, a veritable blizzard of existential debris. The seaman, meanwhile, skateboards through the crowd, still trying to "catch" people with his dragnet, adding to the pandemonium, a human hurricane in a pea coat.

In the rain-dimmed twilight, Sotiroula returned to the corridor of her memories, a hall of relics where the past whispered in fragments, her memory corridor, a hall of whispering relics, a veritable museum of the mundane. But near the window, a new apparition had materialized. There, amidst a swirl of motes, the seaman, having apparently given up on "lobsterin'," has inadvertently dragged up something unexpected with his net. The salad loaf parachute pants, spectral and fragile, lay half-submerged in the tattered mesh, a shimmering apparition in a sea of tangled twine, and surrounded by a small, exhausted group of tap-dancing scorpions. Her hand, trembling, reached to reclaim the relic, a gesture of profound sartorial significance. In that moment, time folded: present, past, and future collided, a temporal origami of the bizarre. The sounds of the Mozart Requiem, mangled and glorious, drift from Echo Park, a fitting soundtrack to Sotiroula's quiet reclamation, a musical requiem for lost salad loaf pants. The piranha, exhausted but triumphant, takes a bow as the acid finally takes full effect, a final, flamboyant flourish. The seaman, scratching his head, mutters something about "strange catch" before skating off into the sunset, leaving Sotiroula with her reclaimed memory and the lingering echoes of absurdity, and the faint clicking of tiny tap shoes, a tableau vivant of the utterly inexplicable.

Your REAL name, given you by your biological twelve-year-old crack mom, was... well, that's another story for another time. Let us just say, that your true name is a testament to the absurd, a monument to the forgotten, a symphony of the nonsensical. Yes. Your REAL name is Donkey. Donkey. Donkey Sauce. Donkey.

RADON GAS

Radon-Pellet-Ring Noir (Aromatic Digression)

By **Brigitta Ernesta Tähtinen**

The Maine soil, a veritable geyser of subterranean effluvium, exhaled radon, a miasma that permeated the very foundations of Elias Thorne's dwelling, a structure of venerable, if somewhat dubious, antiquity. It was not merely the atmospheric burden, the creeping lassitude, the persistent, bronchial complaint, that troubled Mr. Thorne, though these were, to be sure, matters of considerable concern. No, the true source of his disquiet was Gorgeous George.

Gorgeous George, a great horned owl of imposing stature and unsettling ocular intensity, had elected to establish his domicile in the desiccated branches of the elm, a skeletal arboreal monument to mortality, which stood sentinel outside Mr. Thorne's window. And it was Gorgeous George's peculiar dietary habits, his penchant for regurgitating the osseous remnants of his repasts, that initiated the unraveling of this most peculiar narrative.

"First, the murine relics," Mr. Thorne mused, his voice a dry rasp, "delicate, compact packets of skeletal minutiae. Then, the voles, slightly more substantial. And now, this..." He held aloft a digit, a diminutive, yellowed extremity, adorned with a tarnished gold circlet, its inscription a serpentine enigma. "A human phalange. A most unsettling progression."

The ring, heavy and archaic, bore an inscription, which, after a delicate application of gentle abrasives, revealed the name "Jean-Luc." Mr. Thorne, a connoisseur of antiquarian oddities, recalled tales of maritime adventurers, privateers of dubious repute, and buried treasures. A frisson of unease, a premonition of impending revelation, settled upon him.

The atmosphere within the dwelling was thick, a cloying vapor that bore an olfactory resemblance, most disconcerting, to a particularly pungent condiment, a certain "Weird

Meat Boyz" hot sauce, its spicy, metallic tang a disquieting intrusion upon the senses. "A most curious aroma," Mr. Thorne observed, his brow furrowed in contemplation.

He perceived, with a chilling clarity, that Gorgeous George's activities were not merely random acts of predation. The owl was, in effect, conducting an excavation, a macabre archaeological dig, unearthing the past, bone by bone. The progression of prey, from the diminutive to the human, was a chilling testament to this endeavor.

"That avian creature," Mr. Thorne intoned, his voice a low murmur, "is revealing something. The secrets of Jean-Luc." He recalled the local legends, the hidden cove, the buried treasure, the violent denouement. The house, situated upon the edge of a forgotten inlet, a place where secrets lay dormant, was, he suspected, the very epicenter of this enigmatic drama.

The radon, a subtle, insidious poison, clouded his thoughts, yet a sense of profound dread, a premonition of impending revelation, settled upon him. Gorgeous George, with his silent, relentless pursuit, was leading him towards a truth best left undisturbed.

He ventured forth, the ring clutched in his trembling hand, the aromatic pungency of the hot sauce clinging to the damp air. Gorgeous George, perched upon the skeletal branches of the elm, regarded him with unwavering, yellow eyes.

"Pray, George," Mr. Thorne implored, his voice a mere whisper, "reveal your purpose."

The owl descended, a silent, feathered apparition. Mr. Thorne, his senses dulled by the radon, could only observe as the talons extended, the glint of the ring in the owl's beak, the cold, yellow eyes. The aromatic pungency of the hot sauce intensified, a metallic tang upon the damp air. Gorgeous George, his task concluded, returned to his perch, the osseous remains of his final acquisition added to the macabre collection beneath the desiccated elm. The secrets of Jean-Luc, and the fate of Elias Thorne, remained entombed, in the radon-infused soil, beneath the aromatic fog.

UN CHIEN ANDALOU

The Chromatic Cartography of Clara & Clementine

By Hep Valmont

The Goodwill's fluorescent hum—measured, relentless—was a metronome to Clara's meticulous inventory. She held a DVD between two fingers, turning it over as if appraising a relic. "Public domain," she declared, voice a dry rasp, "like unearthed artifacts."

The DVD's label was a faded swirl of colors: L'Âge d'Or.
Across the aisle, Clementine traced the spine of a Funk & Wagnalls encyclopedia with a neon orange bingo marker, humming a tune that seemed to materialize from the static of the overhead lights. "Atonality," she murmured, and then, without transition, sang a fragment of Schoenberg's Moses und Aron.

"Focus, Clementine," Clara snapped, slipping L'Âge d'Or into the player. The screen flickered, the opening sequence—a pastoral montage dissolving into surreal chaos—unfurled before them. A peasant, hands raised in supplication, was lifted into the sky by a swarm of ants.

"Bunuel," Clara muttered, eyes narrowing. "Dadaist affront."

"A dream-state," Clementine whispered, spinning in place. Her voice overlapped with the soundtrack—a collage of overlapping murmurs, distorted laughter, and the rhythmic pulse of Steve Reich's Music for 18 Musicians bleeding from a nearby phone left charging by an absent customer.

A man browsing VHS tapes paused, drawn in by the rhythm of Clementine's movements. A cashier, chewing gum, tilted her head. A toddler, abandoned in a cart of cast-off DVDs,

gurgled in delight as the image of a man dragging a grand piano filled with writhing lobsters crawled across the screen.

Clara, unfazed, reached for another disc. Un Chien Andalou. “Luis Buñuel,” she announced, sliding it into the player. “Surrealist assault on the rational.”

Clementine, entranced, drifted toward a shelf of discarded picture frames. She picked one up, held it to the projected image. The razor slicing through an eye framed itself within the frame. “Mirrors,” she murmured, “windows, thresholds.”
T
he toddler’s mother, finally noticing her child’s joyous babbling, turned—only to find herself reflected in the screen as the crowd in L’Âge d’Or turned to stone, paralyzed in absurdity. She gasped. The cashier blinked. The man with the VHS tapes stepped closer. Clementine, eyes unfocused, muttered a line from Artaud’s The Theatre and Its Double:

“The stage is a place where the unreal becomes real and the real becomes unreal.”
The lights flickered. The projector hummed. The soundtrack morphed—fragments of John Cage’s 4’33” bleeding into the soundtrack of Meshes of the Afternoon, the rhythmic knocking in the film syncing with the silence.

Clara, scanning the room, saw the customers—no, the participants—begin to move in tandem with the film. A woman twirled, her skirt flaring, as if caught in the spirals of a Dalí clock. A teenager, earbuds in, removed them slowly, as if hearing sound for the first time. The cashier tapped her fingers against the register in time with the editing cuts of The Red Shoes.

Clementine, still tracing the projected image on the wall, whispered, “The subconscious, a labyrinth of symbols, where reality and illusion merge.”
A DVD slipped from a nearby shelf—The Holy Mountain. Someone picked it up. Another person picked up Performance. A third, The Man with the Movie Camera. A cascade of movement, of color, of sound.

The Goodwill became a living, breathing film reel.

Clara, her expression unreadable, walked toward the counter. “Do you have a key to the restroom?” she asked the bewildered cashier.
Clementine remained, her body swaying slightly, her gaze fixed on the projected image. A single tear traced a path down her cheek.

Then, from the speakers, a distorted voice—was it Jean-Luc Godard’s?—whispered: It is not the cinema, it is the life.
The eye on the wall blinked.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the spell broke. The customers blinked, looked around, confused. The toddler, still giggling, was removed from the cart. The man with the VHS tapes shuffled back to his browsing. The cashier, chewing gum, pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Clara emerged from the restroom, stacking DVDs beneath her arm. “Ready to proceed?” she asked.

Clementine, her eyes still reflecting the nitrate specter of what had just unfolded, nodded slowly. “Ready,” she whispered.

Toe Bean Freshley, the Avocado Oracle, and the Woodland Revue of Existential Queries

Of Feathers, Avocado and Ennui, In That Order

Toe Bean Freshley, a man whose sartorial statement involved a perpetual avocado-costume, stood in Central Park, a verdant island in the asphalt sea, bearing a sign that read, "Moon: Gibbous Waning. Or, as my tailor would say, 'Slightly rotund, declining.'" Around him, the city's din became a delicate murmur, like a thousand typewriters typing the complete works of "The Phone Book."

Within the confines of his cranium, a woodland clearing bloomed, a stage for his recurring revue of philosophical conundrums. The cast, a motley crew of theatrical archetypes, awaited his pronouncements.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Toe Bean announced, his voice a muffled pronouncement from within the avocado's green embrace, "Mr. Shaw, that verbal pugilist, declares language a pretense! A mere collection of sounds arranged to deceive! He says 'My Fair Lady' is less a musical, and more an auditory hallucination!"

"But," piped up Miss Primrose, the perpetually flustered ingenue, her face a delicate arrangement of nervous tics, "isn't language also a bridge, a way to connect across the chasm of... well, of whatever it is we're connecting across?"

Toe Bean's mind drifted, like a forgotten umbrella on a windy day. He felt the phantom tickle of chicken feathers, a sneeze erupting from his mental aviary. "Chickens sneeze to clear their nostrils," he declared, his voice taking on the nasal timbre of a man attempting to explain quantum physics to a goldfish. "A necessary expulsion, like a bad joke at a funeral."

Professor Quibble, the absent-minded academic, his spectacles perched precariously on his nose, adjusted his bowtie. "Laforgue," he mumbled, his voice a rustling of ancient manuscripts, "saw the world as a series of ironic gestures, a cosmic shrug. He felt the weight of every lost illusion, like a man trying to lift a feather-filled anvil."

The stage dissolved, the clearing fading into the gray-green blur of Central Park. Toe Bean adjusted his avocado head, noticing a pigeon staring at him with the intensity of a tax auditor. "The moon," he mumbled, "is still gibbous waning. Or, as my accountant would say, 'A depreciating asset.'" The city's hum pulsed, a reminder of the strange, fractured reality he inhabited, a reality where time was less a river, and more a loosely-knit sweater.

Lunar Drift, or The Existential Tango

The mirror's face, a silver scar,
Reflects a void, where shadows are,
And also, occasionally, my aunt Mildred.
A lone ship sails on tides unseen,
Where starlight fades, and dreams convene,
And the ship's captain asks, "Are we there yet?"

The clock's cold hand, a frozen tear,
Marks silent hours, year on year,
Or, as they say in accounting, "Accumulated depreciation."
A whispered name, a fading trace,
In empty rooms, time's hollow space,
Like a lost sock in the dryer of existence.

The heart, a cage of rusted wire,
Holds echoes of a lost desire,
And a coupon for two-for-one sadness.
A broken bridge, a distant shore,

Where memories sleep, and hopes implore,
And the tollbooth attendant says, "Exact change only."

The moon, a ghost in velvet skies,
Watches the soul, where darkness lies,
And wonders if it left the oven on.
A single thread, a fragile tie,
Connecting us, beneath the sigh,
Or, as my barber would say, "Next!"

Terminal Liminal, or, Where Lost Luggage Meets Lost Souls

The airport hummed, a low, mechanical drone, like a convention of malfunctioning refrigerators. Elias walked, his suitcase a heavy anchor, or, as he put it, "a portable existential crisis." The announcements, a garbled symphony, blended into a meaningless wash of sound, like a radio tuned to static and the collected works of Gertrude Stein.

He passed Madame Esmeralda, the mysterious fortune teller, whose skin shimmered with a faint, iridescent glow, like a disco ball after a rainstorm. Her eyes, wide and unblinking, held the vastness of a starless night, or, as she put it, "Tuesday." She held a book, its pages blank, but Elias could swear he saw words forming and dissolving like smoke, or, as his therapist would say, "A metaphor."

He turned a corner, and the floor became a flowing river of sand, a beach vacation gone horribly wrong. Professor Quibble sat cross-legged in the middle, his body composed of stacked, mismatched clock parts, like a surrealist cuckoo clock. He smiled, a slow, mechanical grin, and held out a single, ticking gear, or, as he put it, "A metaphor for the passage of time, or, possibly, a loose part."

Elias stumbled, his suitcase clattering, like a metaphor for the fragility of human endeavor. The sand turned back to tile. A child, Master Pip, the precocious child actor, his face a kaleidoscope of shifting colors, pointed at him, his voice a chorus of whispers,

or, as his agent put it, "A multi-layered vocal performance." "He remembers," the child said, his voice echoing in the vast terminal, "the language of falling leaves, or, as my drama coach says, 'Autumnal onomatopoeia.'"

He saw a sign, "Gate 42: Departure to Nowhere, or, as the sign company calls it, 'A typo.'" The letters seemed to twist and writhe, like a sentence written in spaghetti. He felt a sudden, sharp pang of recognition, a sense of having been here before, lost in this liminal space between worlds, or, as his travel agent would say, "A layover." He looked down at his hand, and for a moment, it was not his hand, but a collection of shifting, translucent fragments, like a poorly assembled stained-glass window. The airport's lights flickered, and the hum deepened, as if the very fabric of reality was fraying, or, as the electrician would say, "A short circuit."

The Gilded Mire

By C H. Armstrong

The caldera, a gutted gourd, its meat,
orange ash.
They fell, not men, but the husks of men,
tailored in the language of the contract.
Their hands, a semaphore of absence,
dipped in the slick, the un-water,
the almost-gold.

Obsidian teeth, a rictus,
the cave's mouth.
Yellow blooms, a fungus of sulfur,
the earth's interior, a spoiled fruit.
They are wrong here,
these suits, sharp as razors,
a geometry of error.

One finger, a probe, a tentative lie.
Another, a shadow, stretching,
a hunger made of darkness.
The third, a stone, watching,
his face, a polished lack.
What is the value of this liquid?

The reflection, a film of decay,
a currency lost in the furnace.
Or, the abyss, a black lung,
the raw, untamed want.
The air, a scrim of fumes.

The drip, a metronome of dread.

They are held, not by the rock,
nor the fire,
but by the weight of the if.
The gilded mire, a promise, a lie,
a descent into the dream's hollow core.

And in the slick's sheen,
not gold,
but the echo, the negative space,
of a life unlived.
A scar on the canvas,
a mark of the unseen.

OUT
OF
ORDER
24926

Trout Fish Replica Feeds the Drain Czar.

By Eli Walters

"Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road." – Deuteronomy 27:18

The streetlights in Daytona flicker like dying fireflies, their filaments buzzing in the humid throat of night. Trout Fish Replica sits at his kitchen table, eyes milked over with glaucoma, rubbing the space between his thumb and forefinger where the past used to be. The air smells like old linoleum and something deeper, something wet.

On the counter, the gecko watches him.

"Another bad one," Trout mutters, lifting a trembling hand toward his face, pressing against his temple as if he could squeeze sight back into his sockets.

The gecko flicks its tongue.

Outside, the night is twitching. The alley behind the apartment complex is a purgatory of rusted bicycles and sun-bleached beer cans, a place where stray cats move like hesitant ghosts and lizards with criminal records skitter between broken cinder blocks. Trout leaves the back door open just enough for the gecko to slip out.

Business must be handled.

Trout met the gecko six months ago. Or maybe six years. Time is a loose shirt on him these days, slipping, sagging in places he can't keep track of. It had been watching him from the ceiling above his sink, unmoving for hours, waiting.

"You're not a cop, are you?" Trout had asked.

The gecko blinked.
A pact was made.

Now, the gecko returns, dragging a limp anole in its tiny prehistoric jaws. The lizard's tail twitches, its death not yet fully convinced of itself. Trout kneels, running a calloused finger along its scales.

"This one's a thief," he murmurs. "Broke into my neighbor's place last week. Took a whole sugar packet."
Justice.

He lifts the anole by its tail and carries it to the sink, where King Whopper Chopper waits in the drain, breathing.

The garbage disposal is old, a relic from another time, when machines had lungs and teeth. Its metal maw glistens under the jaundiced kitchen light.
"Feed me," it whispers.

Trout drops the lizard in.

A low, satisfied grinding follows, a sound wet with finality, a sound that shivers up Trout's spine and settles somewhere behind his ribs.

King Whopper Chopper hums.
"More," it says.

Outside, there are dozens.

The alley lizards with their twitchy eyes and sticky fingers. The frogs that squat in the gutters, waiting for the wrong kind of rain. The ones who steal.
Trout Fish Replica is no executioner. No.
He is a servant.

The gecko watches, waiting. The drain breathes, waiting.
And the night, thick and endless, waits.

THE DUCK CANAL

A Short Story in the Shape of a House in the Shape of a Birth Canal in the Shape of a Man's Last Words

By Hyacinth Treadwell

The box factory smelled like cardboard dust and resignation. The fluorescent lights hummed with the sound of a thousand unsaid things. Mr. Henderson stood in front of his six employees, his skin the color of a sticky note left too long in the sun.

"I'm leaving at the end of the week," he said. His voice was a cardboard box crushed underfoot. "Going into palliative. Six weeks, give or take."

Susan made a sound like a balloon deflating. Mark swallowed hard. Even Dale, who once got fired from a Staples for being "emotionally unavailable," wiped at his eyes.

Kenneth raised his hand. No one raised their hand here. This was not an elementary school. This was a place where people made boxes and went home and thought about how much they hated making boxes.

"Mr. Henderson," Kenneth said, loud and clear, "if I build a new house, could it be modeled after your birth canal?"

The room folded in on itself.

Somewhere, a machine whined, pressing cardboard into shapes.

Susan made another sound. This one more like a choking goose.

Mark blinked. Dale looked at Kenneth the way a dog looks at a ceiling fan it just realized was moving.

Mr. Henderson opened and closed his mouth, like a slow-motion fish. Then:
"I never had a birth canal."

A pause. A pause so thick you could pack it in bubble wrap and ship it overnight.

"But I would have liked one," he continued, softer. "To give birth to ducks."
Susan stopped choking.
"I loved my ducks," Mr. Henderson went on. "Quackers. Lucky. Featherbottom. And Bob."

Kenneth nodded. He pulled a stack of markers and printer paper from his backpack, as if this was always the plan.

"Everyone," he said, "draw Mr. Henderson's birth canal. With eggs. Full of ducks."

The room did not move. Then, like a slow, tragic avalanche, people picked up markers.

Mark's birth canal was made of steel beams. Susan's was soft, pink, and pulsating. Dale's was just a rectangle labeled "BIRTH CANAL" in all caps.
Kenneth worked with the focus of a man who had never once second-guessed his own reality.

The machinery clanked. The fluorescent lights buzzed. The smell of dry-erase fumes filled the air.
And somewhere, impossibly, a duck quacked.

Three weeks later, Mr. Henderson lay in a hospital bed, his skin now translucent, like wax paper held up to the light.

Kenneth came in, holding a tablet like it was a sacred text. "Mr. Henderson," he said, trembling, "I raised $389,000 on Patreon. The house will be built."
Mr. Henderson blinked slowly.

"The Duck Canal?"
Kenneth nodded. "The Duck Canal."

Then came the sound.
Soft, insistent.
A chorus of peeps.

Baby ducks. Dozens of them. Tiny, yellow, downy. They spilled onto the bed, their little claws scratching against the sheets, their warmth pressing into Mr. Henderson's failing body.

Susan placed one on his chest. Mark tucked one into the crook of his arm. Dale stood at the foot of the bed, holding a duckling at arm's length, unsure of how one cradled grief.

Mr. Henderson exhaled, slow and long.

The breath left him.
The ducks filled the space.

Outside, in the distance, the first beams of *The Duck Canal* were being laid.
Inside, the last of Mr. Henderson was dissolving into the sound of soft, yellow, living things.

A birth, of sorts.

DOES IT MATTER? EAT.

By Billy Tomball

The kitchen stinks of peppermint and something burned.
Not fire. Not ruin. Something worse—
the kind of heat that lingers
in a body after a bad decision.

I lean against the counter, hands sticky.
The flour ghosts the air, a slow snowfall.
I tell you to sit.

You don't.

I crack an egg against the rim of a glass,
watch the yolk slip free, golden and obscene.
You're still standing there,
mouth full of questions that don't belong to you.

WHO STOLE THE CANDY?

Your voice is a flick-knife,
small but sharp, aimed at my ribs.
A detective's voice. A priest's voice.
I can't tell the difference anymore.

I roll the dough thinner, thinner—
so thin it could be skin.
Press the edges together. Breathe.

YOU CALL IT A CRIME, I CALL IT A MASTERPIECE.

You think hunger is just
a thing you feel in the stomach.
But it lives in the hands, too.
In the teeth. In the pulse.

The peppermints melted in the vodka,
sweet and sharp, a little bit like blood,
a little bit like forgetting.
The ricotta soaked it up like a confession.

WHO DOES THIS? WHO DREAMS UP SUCH A CRIME?

The moon is a broken plate outside the window.
I should have stolen that, too.
Instead, I stole sugar. Heat.
The last good thing in the house.

You say my name like an alibi.
I say yours like a prayer.

THE WATER IS BOILING.

The ravioli float to the surface,
soft bodies rising from the dark.
I fish them out one by one,
lay them on a plate like evidence.

TASTE, BEFORE YOU JUDGE.

A beat. A breath.
You take the fork.

The first bite is silence.

The second, something like surrender.

Citations

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